

Column Title: The Travel Journal

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Going to Tokyo: Newbies Take Note.

For those of you who have never traveled to a major international city, you may become overwhelmed by the sheer size and scope of the environment you are entering. Tokyo is no exception.

When you first arrive in Japan, you may be comforted by the unique scenery as you approach Narita Airport. The interesting contrast between Vancouver and Narita can easily catch one off guard. Leaving Vancouver, you can see the whole Lower Mainland virtually covered in urban development. As you take-off towards the East, you see the buildings in Richmond shrink smaller and smaller, your view of the city becoming ever more broad. If you keep your eyes to the ground, you will begin to see Highway 99 that cuts through from Richmond to Ladner until you see the road disappear under the Fraser River in the George Massey Tunnel. Your view constantly changes as the plane begins to turn towards the Pacific, on its way to one of the most dynamic places on earth.

Narita, however, is nothing like Vancouver. Once you reach the Japanese coast, the main thing you will find are rice fields, and manmade hills and forests scattered around the region. As you maintain your gaze on the straight rows of fields, your eyes will shift to find a twisting road that is surrounded, haphazardly as it seems, by buildings and houses that constitute a small village.

When you land in Narita, the airport seems surprisingly quiet. Despite being an airport that moves over 23 million international passengers a year (excluding domestic flights, according to an 1994 statistics report), everything seems set up for a calm arrival. The small looking village, the relatively quiet airport—it would make you feel like you're travelling to a quaint BC town than a major metropolis.

Although, your perceptions may begin to change when you notice that you are arriving at Narita's **second** terminal. If you had done some travelling research, you would know that Narita is ranked as one of the world's 10 ten most busiest airports. Once your plane arrives at the terminal, you will also notice that the airport gate you arrived in is actually an annex to the second terminal and you have to take a short shuttle train (something similar to Skytrain, but much older) to the terminal building.

It is definitely to the developers' credit that Narita provides such a calm arrival from the frantic pace of Tokyo. Once you have finished going through customs, you can either take a limousine bus or a train to take you to the center of Tokyo, both of which provide a comfortable ride, preparing you for the quick pace that defines Japan's major metropolis.

Of course the busy-ness of the city will depend on the time of day you arrive, but for the bulk of the day, Tokyo is always busy, especially Japan Rail's (JR) Tokyo Station. If you take the Narita Express from the airport to Tokyo, you will find yourself right in the middle of the transportation system in the city. Tokyo station is where virtually all the trains come and go to bring you to your destination. All the *shinkansen*, or bullet trains, are there, taking you in any direction, to places as close as Nagano, to more historic places like Kyoto, or other cities such as Osaka, and all the way to Hiroshima or all the way North to Hokkaido. While I have not counted, there are at least 50 trains that take you to where ever you have to go, half of those are the bullet trains, and half are the various subways and passenger trains taking you to the various regional cities inside Tokyo.

If you plan to travel around Japan, it is best to get a Japan Rail Pass, which allows you to travel on any JR train for the price of the pass. Its price is based in yen (Japan's currency), so the price in Canadian dollars will of course fluctuate. Nevertheless, it is worth getting at least a seven day pass (if you are planning to stay that long or longer), and just go to various places both inside Tokyo and around Japan. For example, the round trip from Tokyo to Hiroshima (about 10 hours there and back) already 'pays' for the travel pass. One thing that can be extremely valuable for English travellers is to buy a travel mapbook that has all the Japanese names of stations and landmarks romanized (kanji translated into the alphabet). Otherwise you will be stuck trying to remember all the Japanese characters that make up the name of each station.

The biggest question is whether you will need to know basic Japanese. Of course, if you know some Japanese, especially if you can read Hiragana or Katagana, it will be easier for you to handle travelling on your own, or with a companion. A simple rule of thumb is, the farther from the centre of Tokyo you get, the harder it will be for you to find someone that speaks 'some' English. Most employees inside huge department stores (and I mean

huge—one store easily being four to five times larger than a regular The Bay store) will know basic English phrases, and there will be some English on signs and windows.

Going to Japan is anything 'but' a vacation. It is an adventure for your average Canadian. Of course it doesn't come cheap. Transportation costs alone (flight, train, bus, taxis) can cost you CDN\$1700 alone. But the experience can be breathtaking if you've never been to such a place. There is nothing that puts things into greater perspective than to travel and find out for yourself, which city you love best and consider to be home.